AH GAU'S NEW-YEAR'S CELEBRATION.

By Theodore Wores.

Chinatown of San Francisco was keeping holiday, and all was gaiety and bustle.

The narrow, picturesque streets were decorated with brightly-colored lanterns, while overhead, above the roof-tops, the yellow dragon-flags floated against a blue California sky.

It was a sunny day in February; and the streets were swarming with a multitude of Chinese—men, women, and children—all arrayed in their richest holiday attire. The children especially, with their bright faces and black eyes, and in their pretty costumes, formed a most pleasing and interesting feature of this living Oriental picture.

Everybody seemed to be happy and good-natured; and ever and anon, as a group of friends met, they stopped and amid much ceremonious bowing exchanged the compliments of the season; for this festive occasion was nothing more nor less than the celebration of the Chinese New Year.

The idea of celebrating New Year's Day in February may strike some of my readers as odd. But, since this has been the Chinese custom from time immemorial, and is older, by several thousands of years, than our acceptance of the first of January as the proper time, the Chinese, perhaps, are not far wrong in supposing themselves to be at least as much in the right as ourselves. This question, however, was of no concern to this merry holiday throng. They were quite satisfied with the arrangement; and, with the utmost belief in their own superiority, they felt at heart an inborn contempt—common to all Chinese—for "outside barbarians." (This term embraces all nations not living within the sacred boundaries of "The Flowery Kingdom," and includes the inhabitants of all the world; and these unfortunate outsiders are broadly divided into two classes—Eastern and Western barbarians.)

This feeling was, no doubt, shared by Ah Gau, a very tiny Chinese boy,—the subject of this sketch,—who, with his friend Ah Sing, was proudly strutting through one of the crowded thoroughfares of Chinatown. Ah Gau was five years of age and his friend was seven. This was one of the most eventful days of the little man's short life; and the purpose of this story is to relate some of his doings on this Chinese New Year's Day.

These two little boys were dressed in the height of fashion. Ah Gau wore a pale blue quilted blouse reaching to his knees, and his sleeves were so long that his hands were rarely to be seen. He had on red silk trousers, loose above, but tightly wound around the ankles, while his richly embroidered shoes were provided with white-painted soles nearly two inches thick. A round skull-cap, surmounted by a red button, completed this most elegant costume. No wonder he was pleased with himself, and proud of his dazzling appearance.

But, for all this, his mind was not at ease and his face wore a troubled look. This was owing to the annoyance to which he had just been subjected by a group of city boys who had passed by. They had stopped and stared most rudely at him, and then had burst out into loud laughter when one of them had cried out, "See de blooming little Chinese dude!"

Though Ah Gau had paid no attention to this insult, and had scornfully passed them by, his dignity had been ruffled; not so much by the rude remark as by the laughter that had followed. The fact was that, while he was an American born, Ah Gau understood next to nothing of the English language; and what little education he had acquired was received in a Chinese school—where only Chinese was taught.

He had rarely been outside of Chinatown, and his knowledge of the American boy was limited to a very low class—mainly those street

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Arabs and ragamuffins who live in the slums in and about the Chinese quarter.

He had but few opportunities of seeing a higher type of the American boy; consequently,

A LITTLE CHINESE GIRL WITH LILIES.

it can hardly be wondered at that Ah Gau regarded them as little barbarians.

Ever since he could remember these little hoodlums had tormented him — even taking the liberty, at times, of tugging at his pigtail. He had been annoyed and abused in every possible way. Only a few days before he had been held up in regular highwayman fashion, and robbed of a stick of sugar-cane which he had just purchased.

No wonder that he had come to look upon these white boys as his natural enemies. After this latest proof of their rudeness, he remarked to Ah Sing: "What ill-bred boys! They are so wild and rude!" He added reflectively, "But I suppose that not one of them has ever learned any of the wise sayings of the great and good Confucius!"

It must not be supposed that this little pagan of five years always talked in so grown-up a manner as this. There were times when he romped and played like other boys. But this was a great occasion that called forth all his pride and dignity. It was, in fact, the first time that he was enjoying the proud privilege of being allowed to make New Year's calls.

He had already made three: but his list was a long one; and he and his friend were now on their way to pay their respects to his uncle, Wang Tai, a wealthy and respected merchant who kept a Chinese drug-store.

Now and then, as they went through the streets, they met boys of their acquaintance, quite as finely attired as themselves. Then they always stopped, and after a series of low and dignified bows exchanged New Year's greetings — each, in the meanwhile, shaking hands with himself. It is not the custom, nor is it considered good form, for the Chinese to shake hands with one another. Their idea seems a good one, and would, no doubt, be favored by such unfortunates as Presidents and other public men who at times are obliged to stand for hours and shake hands with thousands of all sorts and conditions of men.

When Ah Gau and Ah Sing met any of their elders they were not in the least shy, and the same exchange of salutations took place. At all such times they behaved with great decorum, quite like little old men. Chinese children, from their earliest childhood, are treated by their parents more or less as if grown up.

That, in a measure, is why Chinese children, such as our little friends Ah Gau and Ah Sing, affect that oldish manner which marks the chief difference between Chinese and American children.

As Ah Gau swaggered along his mind was hard at work. Much had been accomplished; but still more was to be done before this day, so crowded with great events, would end. Several days already had been spent in making suitable preparations for this holiday; and the day before, as early as six o'clock, he had been up, and, in company with the entire family, had paid a visit to the neighboring Joss-house.

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The procession — for some queer reason the Chinese always seem to walk in single file — was headed by his father, carrying the baby brother proudly in his arms. The mother and sister carried baskets, filled with offerings to the gods; while Ah Gau had contented himself with parading his finery only.

The interior of the Joss-house was but dimly lighted; and when the eyes once became used to the mysterious and smoky atmosphere that filled the place, strange and weird faces of gods and demons showed through the darkness and gazed solemnly down from rich altars upon the visitors. A priest, seated at the entrance, had a supply of painted candles, sticks of incense made of sandalwood, and packets of papers containing printed prayers.

Having bought a supply of these helps to worship, Ah Gau and his family had entered the inner room of the pagan gods. In the presence of these images, with hideous, painted faces, dimly looming out of the darkness and mystery of the incense-laden atmosphere, most American boys of Ah Gau's age would have been terror-stricken. He, on the contrary, seemed to be quite at ease among these strange things and went near to the uncanny idols with quite an air of familiarity. He boldly walked up to a large drum standing in one corner and, seizing a drumstick, pounded on it with all his might, for the purpose of drawing the attention of the gods to the worshipers.

He then had joined with the family in placing a large number of lighted candles and smoking incense-sticks upon the altar; after which they had bent themselves in prayer before the principal image of the temple. A number of offerings — cakes, fruits, and various articles of food, as well as rice-wine — were next piled up before this deity. Their devotions ended with the burning of a lot of printed prayers in a little brick furnace erected in a corner of the Joss-house for that purpose. As they left, a pack of fire-crackers was set off; and then, thoroughly satisfied with themselves, and with minds at rest, they had gone homeward.

On the way they had stopped to buy some lily bulbs at the flower-market, which was a row of booths erected along both sides of the street, and forming a most picturesque sight. These lily bulbs, narcissuses, are quite a feature of the New Year's decorations, and are imported from China in great quantities for this occasion.

Ah Gau's mother, after carefully examining a number, had bought about a half-dozen, which Ah Gau's little sister carefully had carried home. They then were placed each one in a shallow, crab-shaped dish filled with pebbles and water

Under these conditions, the bulbs continue to sprout freely, producing, in a short time, a fine cluster of lilies. It is believed by the Chinese that the greater the number of flowers, the better will be their luck during the ensuing year.

Every Chinese household, even the poorest, is brightened by at least one of these plants during the New Year's season. In addition to the lily-

"A WEALTHY AND RESPECTED CHINESE MERCHANT."

booths are many others, devoted to the sale of goldfish, birds, fruits, confectionery, and everything necessary for the proper observance and enjoyment of the New Year's festivities.

Ah Gau and his friend now arrived at his uncle's house and entered the drug-store.

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NEW-YEAR'S DAY IN CHINATOWN. BUYING NARCISSUS BULBS.

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The interior of this shop presented a strange and Oriental aspect. One corner was occupied by the household shrine, the chief feature of which was a highly colored picture of some favorite god. The smoke of burning incense, issuing from a brightly polished brazen vessel, rose from the altar before this deity and filled the air with its mysterious fragrance. Beside the shrine, on a table, was an abundant supply of refreshment, consisting of cakes, both red and yellow; of lichi nuts, oranges, candied ginger, a number of boxes of cigars; and last, but not least, of bottles containing *sam-sheu*, the favorite beverage of the Chinese.

Ah Gau's uncle, dressed in a long yellow silk blouse, was standing near this table, busily engaged in doing the honors to his numerous callers. He greeted his nephew and his friend with great cordiality, and invited them to partake of refreshments; but Ah Gau modestly contented himself with a handful of dried water-melon seeds, which he dropped into his capacious inside pocket.

One side of the shop was taken up by a long counter; and shelves and drawers extended all around the room. These were covered and filled with a great and miscellaneous collection of strange and rare herbs and roots. Deer-horns, in their velvet stage, were suspended from the ceiling. These, after being sliced as thin as wafers, are boiled, and produce what is supposed to be a valuable medicine. Dried lizards, neatly spread on thin bamboo sticks, occupied a basket at one end of the counter. Dried toads, shark's tails, and many other curious objects used in the preparation of Chinese medicines, littered the shop from end to end; and a richly carved and gilded open-work screen, with two dragons in the center, extended across the middle of the ceiling.

The Chinese are very much behindhand in their knowledge of medicine. Their methods, which are based on ignorance and superstition, are quite as absurd and primitive as were those of the Europeans of the Middle Ages.

During Ah Gau's visit, a white man, very tramp-like in appearance, entered, and begged for alms. The uncle cheerfully handed him some money, and he departed. He was followed, shortly afterward, by two rather rough-looking young men, who wished the host a Happy New Year. These were promptly rewarded with a handful of cigars, which they stowed away in their pockets; then they, too, departed, presumably to continue their New Year's calls indefinitely, as long as the supply of hospitable Chinese lasted. Beggars of all kinds reap a rich harvest on this holiday, as they have discovered that the Chinese are then very liberal.

The fact is, the Chinese is superstitious, and he avoids any kind of unpleasantness on New Year's Day, for fear that ill-luck may pursue him during the ensuing year. An evil wish or a suggestion of bad luck is most unfortunate; and any allusion to death is received with superstitious dread, as portending some terrible misfortune. He takes every precaution against anything of a disagreeable nature, and, rather than incur ill-will, extends hospitality to every tramp and beggar who appears at his door.

Our little friends found the constant coming and going of visitors to their uncle's shop so interesting that thay continued to linger, quite forgetful of the long list of calls still to be made, until the afternoon was well advanced. They became deeply fascinated with the preparations being made by some of the servants for the closing ceremony of the day, the purpose of which was to "drive away evil spirits;" and as this consists of firing off great quantities of fire-crackers, it was naturally regarded by Chinese, as well as by American boys, as the most important and exciting event of the day.

The servants were engaged in fastening bunch after bunch of fire-crackers, varied by an occasional bomb or giant fire-cracker, to a long rope. At sundown this was to be taken up on the roof, and suspended from a projecting pole, the end of this monster tail of fire-crackers reaching to the ground. Ah Gau knew that similar preparations were being made at all the other houses along the street, and he could hardly restrain his impatience and wait until this terrible racket was to break loose. But several hours still must pass before sunset; so he had to subdue his impatience as best he could.

It ended by his crawling into a large teak-wood armchair in a corner. He gazed about, for a time, at the surrounding objects that filled

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the shop; then his eyelids grew heavy; his head nodded, and, before he was aware of it, he was sound asleep. Ah Gau no sooner had fallen asleep than he had a dream.

He saw, to his utter amazement, the dried lizards suddenly become alive; and one by one they slowly crawled out of their boxes toward him. The nearer they approached, the larger they seemed to grow — until they were transformed into huge alligators! As they stood there, ranged before him, the largest remarked, in very good Chinese: "Did you ever see such a sleepy-head?" "His mother really should have put him to bed!" remarked the second. "Ha, ha!" laughed the third. "He thinks himself grown-up — look at that absurd little pigtail!"

Ah Gau was so indignant at these insulting comments, that his anger overcame his fear. "You hold your tongues and mind your own business!" he loudly shouted at them. "You think yourselves very big; but you are, after all, only a pack of dried lizards; and if you don't crawl back into your box, where you belong, I will let my uncle know about this, and he will make short work of you. Then you will be ground up into powder and made into pills. That's what you were made for — not to go swaggering about, insulting your betters!"

The alligators fairly gasped, for a moment; then they exclaimed, in tones of indignation: "Did you ever?" "What impudence!" remarked the gilded dragon, from overhead. "I 'd like to blow him up for his impudence!" said a giant fire-cracker. "Let 's!" squeaked the little ones. "Yes!" they all shouted in chorus; "that 's what he deserves. Blow him up, and let us make him burn and sizzle!" The place was now in an uproar; and Ah Gau's little pigtail stood on end as myriads of little fire-crackers formed into companies, and, led by the giants, charged down upon him.

He fought desperately, and tried to beat them off. Without avail! Like a flight of locusts, they all surrounded him in an instant. His pigtail was transformed into a rope of fire-crackers. And now the stick of smoking incense volunteered his aid. He turned a double somersault, and touched his fiery head to a fire-cracker attached to Ah Gau's pigtail.

As the wick hissed and sizzled a momentary hush succeeded the turmoil. Then followed a most infernal din of exploding fire-crackers. It gave Ah Gau such a start that he awoke.

He sat on the floor, rubbing his eyes for a moment, before he realized where he was. It puzzled and alarmed him when he discovered that he was all alone; while the terrible din of his dream continued and increased. Then all at once it dawned upon him that the ceremony of "frightening away the evil spirits" was in progress. Realizing that his friends had adjourned to the street to witness this interesting, if noisy, process, he hurried to the door. Ah Gau had a good view of the scene, now enveloped in an atmosphere of smoke. Flashes of fire darted in red tongues all along the street, and the long rope of fire-crackers exploded with a noise and rattle that could be heard miles away. The din was deafening. No wonder the evil spirits were fleeing in dismay!

Such was not the effect produced, however, on the small American boys who had gathered together in hundreds from all directions. Combined assaults were made by them on the fiery, sputtering mass; and though they were driven back repeatedly by the suffocating smoke, that only seemed to strengthen their determination to stamp upon and rescue a few of the unexploded fire-crackers.

Ah Gau gazed scornfully upon the scene, as these demon-like figures danced in and out of the smoke and fire. "Look at those red-headed demons! They seem to be fire-proof," he remarked to his uncle. After pondering a while, he continued: "I have been told that all this noise and fire and smoke is to drive away evil spirits; but it seems to bring them, like flies around a sugar-bowl."

The seeming failure of this noisy method of combatting the bad spirits set his young mind to thinking. Doubts entered his little pagan brain; and I hope that these increased and multiplied until at last they stormed that fortress of darkness and superstition, and admitted clear light of truth.

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